

Before You Send Us Your Article: A Guide to Style, Self-Editing and Formatting

Once we “greenlight” your proposal, you are invited to submit a full article. Before you send us your work, please self-edit and format the piece to conform to *Contexts*’ unique style. Former editors Doug Hartmann and Chris Uggen summarize what makes writing for *Contexts* unique: “Our contributors must dispense with the everyday apparel of the scholarly publication. The layers of conceptual abstraction, the high-end designer methods and statistics, and the foundational undergarments of literature reviews—all gone.”

By self-editing and formatting your own article, you lower the chance that we’ll edit your writing and inadvertently alter its meaning. Plus, you’ll save us work! (If a particular style concern is not addressed in the following, please consult the ASA Style Guide (2011) and the AP Stylebook and Libel Manual.)

Elements of *Contexts* Style

Academic journals publish articles in which authors “tell,” or report on their findings. Magazine writing invites authors to “show—to describe, set scenes, and allow interviewees to speak. *Contexts* is a scholarly-journalistic hybrid; we encourage you to submit writing that shows as well as tells. Imagine that a typical reader is your college-educated aunt, or a savvy college junior, and try to make the article compelling and accessible to him or her.

Structure of a *Contexts* Article

1. *Lead/intro*. The first few paragraphs should draw the reader in, providing context for the story. Set the scene with a brief vignette, provocative claim, etc.
2. *Nutgraf*. State your thesis, or “nut” early on in the story, somewhere in the first five paragraphs, without giving it all away.
3. *Establish authority*: why should we listen to you? How did you do your research. (e.g. “I’ve spent the past two years looking at how parents interact with their daughters on the soccer field...”).
4. *Mini-lit review*. What is the prevailing wisdom on the subject? How is what you’re saying new and different? This replaces traditional literature reviews and provides background for general readers.
5. *Tell a story*. To the best of your ability, populate your prose with living, breathing characters who develop over time, and sometimes even come into conflict with another.
6. *Conclusion/kicker*. Bring main point home, perhaps referring back to the original vignette in the introduction. Include call to action if relevant.
7. *Recommended resources* --mini annotated bibliography—in *Contexts* style
8. *Brief bio*—in *Contexts* style

Samples of *Contexts* articles are available on this website.

Checklist for Self-Editing

Many *Contexts* authors repeat the same writing problems. This guide points out some of the most common errors and suggests corrections. (Thanks to JumpCut for some of this phrasing).

1. Wordiness

Brevity truly is the soul of wit. A sentence almost always sounds better if you use fewer words. Write as concisely as you can. Use contractions where they feel right. For many authors and an accessible style, they're appropriate, but some may write in a way in which "can't" feels forced. Be adaptable, but err on the side of the less formal.

2. Excessive passive construction

You can quickly identify passive verb forms, a common problem in academic writing, by "to be" verbs before a form of the main verb. Often used to avoid "I," they slow down your writing, sound unnatural, and rob verbs of impact. Active verbs help readers, provide variety, and add punch. Underline every passive construction and try to limit yourself to one per paragraph on rewriting.

3. Failure to use the first person

Passive construction and the coy use of "one," "the author," etc. are evasive and lack personality. Use "I" to speak of yourself and "we" to refer to what you, as writer, and the reader can do together. (E.g., "I will argue..." or "From this we can see....") Obviously, co-authored articles are an exception.

4. Excessive qualification

Pay attention to the difference between precision and mealy-mouthed qualification. Be careful in using "might," "should," "often," "would seem," "perhaps," etc. Excessive qualification makes you look timid and your argument halfhearted.

5. Excess prepositional phrases

Strings of prepositions slow down your writing; you can reduce them by using possessives, adverbs, and adjectives to make the same point. Put brackets around each prepositional phrase and see how many you can eliminate.

Arch terms, translations, and unclear neologisms

"Nuance" as a verb is an anglicism that sounds pretentious to US ears and

destroys your credibility, as do other words our readers don't commonly use in speaking. Check your vocabulary against mundane general usage; if it seems unusual, see if you're gaining anything by using it. For example, the figurative use of "foreground" as a verb seldom means more than the everyday verb "to emphasize." ("Privilege," "articulate," "inflect," as verbs are similarly questionable.) The literal translation of foreign critical terms without explanation (e.g., "overdetermination," "difference," "problematic" as a noun) confuses earnest readers who want to understand what you have to say but don't have a pass key to the concepts. Use neologisms only if they clarify and enhance the meaning.

6. Clichés

Stand back from your writing and look for tired and trite expressions such as: "intensely personal," "the bottom line," "there are a number of" (for "numerous"). While we are always ready to help nonnative speakers of English get articles in shape, we have little time for interesting pieces with severe style problems from native speakers. It's up to the writer. Any standard college composition and grammar book will elaborate on the above.

7. Jargon

Avoid as much technical jargon as possible. Particularly troublesome and over-used terms include: sociological imagination, discourses, organizational forms, (social, market, corporate, etc.) actors, hegemony (and its various forms). Avoid rhetorical questions, equations, and conclusions that end with "more research is needed."

One of the best ways of self-editing is to read your writing aloud, making any corrections along the way. It works! Really.

Formatting

1. Quotes, In-text Citations.

We do not use block quotes. Regardless of the length of a quote, we run it as part of the flow of the text. Don't quote simply for the sake of quoting; choose particularly telling, colorful quotes that capture the distinctiveness of the speaker.

Rather than writing formal citations in ASA Style, smooth out sentences to include the necessary information without a parenthetical citation or footnote. We don't want citations to interrupt the flow of the thought and we don't include a bibliography.

- o NO: In *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000), the author showed that a variety of forms of civic engagement were on the decline.

- o YES: Robert Putnam, in his influential book *Bowling Alone*, showed that a variety of forms of civic engagement were on the decline.

2. Recommended Resources

Rather than a typical list of “sources cited,” at the end of each feature article we list recommended resources. Here the citation is followed by a one- or two-sentence descriptor of the piece and its relevance for those interested in learning more about the article’s topic. This is not a bibliography, just five or six readings that would be useful for more information or topical background.

- o BOOK: Picou, J. Steven, Duane A. Gill, and Maurie J. Cohen (eds.). *The Exxon Valdez Disaster: Readings on a Modern Social Problem* (Kendall-Hunt, 1999). Provides a general introduction to technological disasters as a social problem.
- o ARTICLE: Glaeser, Edward, David Cutler, and Jacob Vigdor. “The Rise and Decline of the American Ghetto,” *Journal of Political Economy* (1999), 107:455-560. The first study to thoroughly...

3. Bios

We keep to a fairly rigid bio style so as to equalize our authors to the extent that it’s possible. The general format is:

Xxx is in the xxx department at xxx college or university. He/She is the author of xxx [list only ONE book] OR He/She studies xxx [list up to three research interests].

Department names are not capitalized, we do not include the publisher and year for books, and titles like Professor or Academic Excellence Chair in Sociology are not used. For graduate students, the only shift is that we write “is in the xxx program” rather than department. Obviously, this style must have some flexibility for special cases, multiple authors, etc., and occasionally we’ve included extra information where it’s particularly relevant (such as including the sentence “He was an expert witness in *Dukes v. Wal-Mart*” for an author who was writing about the case).